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Department of Children and Families Secretary Reggie Bicha Calls for Changes in Milwaukee Child Welfare System

Following the tragic death of one-year-old Christopher Thomas Jr., Reggie Bicha, the Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, outlined changes to improve safety and prevent future tragedies in Milwaukee's child welfare system.

"Baby Christopher's death has deeply saddened all of us," Secretary Bicha said. "At the Department of Children and Families, keeping children safe is our top priority. We are committed to improving the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare and dedicated to working with our partner agencies to better serve the needs of vulnerable children and families."

The internal investigation into Baby Christopher's child protective services case revealed mistakes were made by staff at La Causa, an agency that contracts with BMCW to provide services to children in one region of Milwaukee.

In violation of BMCW policy, La Causa gave a new ongoing case manager on a training team primary case worker responsibility and did not provide sufficient supervision or mentoring. The investigation found that the case manager failed to conduct effective face-to-face visits with the children and caregivers and did not effectively assess the safety of the home where both Baby Christopher and his sister were placed.

"At DCF and BMCW, we take our responsibility of protecting children very seriously, and we expect our partners to do the same," Secretary Bicha said. "There were indications at different times, especially in September and October, that the abuse these children experienced could have been identified before it came to its fatal conclusion."

Secretary Bicha directed all cases of the La Causa supervisor and the case manager to be reviewed to ensure that other children were not at risk. He also called for La Causa to make immediate changes to comply with BMCW policy or their contract will be terminated.

"We have notified La Causa of our intent to terminate their contract unless the quality of their case practices and management improves," Secretary Bicha said. "To monitor the quality of case practice, the Department will conduct reviews of a sample of open ongoing case management cases. If La Causa does not make significant progress in three months, their contract will be terminated."

To improve safety standards and performance within BMCW and its partner agencies, Secretary Bicha announced that case managers will now be required to double their visits to children three years old or younger.

DCF also plans to work with Children's Hospital and Health System to conduct a health and safety review of all children age three and younger in out-of-home care.

The department's Office of Performance and Quality Assurance will now oversee BMCW program evaluation and contract performance. Previously, BMCW staff had reviewed its own practices.

"One of our department's most important and challenging responsibilities is protecting children in Milwaukee who face serious risks of abuse and neglect," Secretary Bicha said. "We must do better, and we will."

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